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SUBJECT: DIYALA PRT: BRING BACK THE BA'ATHISTS? IT COULD WORK

¶1. (U) This is a Diyala PRT reporting cable.

Summary

¶2. (SBU) Summary: Several senior provincial executives in Diyala Province, both Sunni and Shia, believe that controlled conditions allowing former Ba'ath party members to return to public life would accelerate the stalled reconciliation process and eliminate a major source of division in Iraqi politics. Despite differing backgrounds and perspectives, all government officials who discussed this were remarkably homogenous in their belief that Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Order #1 - De-Ba'athification of Iraqi Society - had effectively decapitated the public sector and was to blame for the largely dysfunctional technical administration in Diyala today. They proposed that former Ba'athists be allowed to return to public life once they are screened and vetted and are able to produce convincing evidence that they have no 'bloody hands.' End Summary.

Similar Perspectives

¶3. (SBU) PRTOffs interviewed four senior executives who work at the Governance Center (GC) on their general views regarding De-Ba'athification. The officials interviewed asked to remain anonymous. For background purposes, three are elected officials, one is an appointee, two are Sunni, and two are Shia. All were interviewed individually and encouraged to provide their most frank assessment on several topics. Their responses to the various interview topics were remarkably similar. Interview topics included the Ba'ath party under Saddam, the future of a Ba'ath party, CPA Order Number 1, and De-Ba'athification. Each respondent provided multiple anecdotes to support their viewpoints.

The Ba'ath Party Under Saddam And The Future

¶4. (SBU) All respondents indicated that the Ba'ath Party under Saddam Hussein was Ba'athist in name only, and had been merely created to champion Saddam's priorities and tighten Saddam's grip on power. Party membership and some degree of participation were critical to achieving upward mobility in society. Advancement within the party was largely limited to Sunni members of specific tribes. Refusal to join the party guaranteed downward mobility or worse. All those interviewed said they were discriminated against as a result of not joining the party, and one indicated he had been denied an opportunity for advanced education because he was not a Ba'athist, despite being in the top five percent of his class. He added that Ba'athist students with lower qualifications were allowed to attend advanced schooling, solely based on party affiliation. All agreed that the Ba'ath party under Saddam had no relation to the ideology of the original Ba'athist Pan-Arab, secular ideology that still exists in other Arab countries. Respondents were ambivalent about the formation of a Ba'ath party in Iraq today provided it maintained no ideological relationship with Saddam. One explained that a new Ba'ath party, if formed, would be dead on arrival based on name association alone.

CPA Order Number 1

¶5. (SBU) Each government official maintained that CPA Order Number

1 was a disaster that continues to impact Iraq four years later. The order, which was implemented in May 2003, removed all Iraqis with Ba'athist affiliation from public life and government employment. Each official described the order as decapitating the nation and as Iraq's greatest tragedy. One official said that removing three layers of officials from government ministries and local offices inevitably left the least educated and qualified to fill official positions. Another senior official asked rhetorically whether there was any other result that could have come from removing the head, his deputy, the deputy, the deputy's assistant, and the senior administrative staff from every single office requiring technical expertise. The officials made clear that they were speaking exclusively of Ba'athists with no involvement in criminal activities, but had achieved a degree of personal education and competence by virtue of their membership in the Ba'ath party. A senior official in the provincial government told PRTOffs that it was widely acknowledged in Diyala that most, if not all, of the individuals appointed by the central government to be Directors General (DG) of various ministries are incompetent and are directly responsible for the current dysfunctional provincial government.

De-Ba'athification - The Time Has Come

16. (SBU) We asked the government officials if and under what conditions they thought individual Ba'athists could return to public life or be rehabilitated. The responses were striking in their uniformity. All suggested that if individuals' records were examined and it was determined they had committed no serious criminal actions, they should be allowed to return to public life. A phrase we heard repeatedly was the need to ensure the former Ba'athists had no "bloody hands". The government officials stressed that from a humanitarian view, screening and vetting former Ba'athists makes sense. Additionally, they also strongly argued that excluding Ba'athists, as is current policy, does nothing to

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mitigate Ba'athist influence in society. They said it merely relegates former Ba'athists to sponsoring sub-rosa activities, frequently from outside the country, in an attempt to return to some form of political participation.

Return To Society, Not Return To Power

17. (SBU) One executive felt that a return of the best educated, most experienced administrators would greatly enhance the ongoing reconciliation process, not as individuals coming into the ranks of power, but as skilled facilitators of an improved quality of life work for the average person. Diyala executives feel that the average citizen longs for a technical level of leadership that can take care of business and has less concern for the ideological, religious, or other divisive issues that prevent the delivery of essential services.

Comment

18. (U) In Diyala, it seems clear rehabilitating Ba'athists and getting the province back in working order is a prime consideration of the leadership. Despite the fact that none of these executives would have risen to their current positions had Ba'athists been participating in the government process, it is remarkable that they speak with one voice, Sunni and Shia, when they say that they feel the time is right to screen, vet, and restore to public life those former Ba'athists with no blood on their hands. End Comment.

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